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Micah Hawkins  
and the  
Saw-Mill

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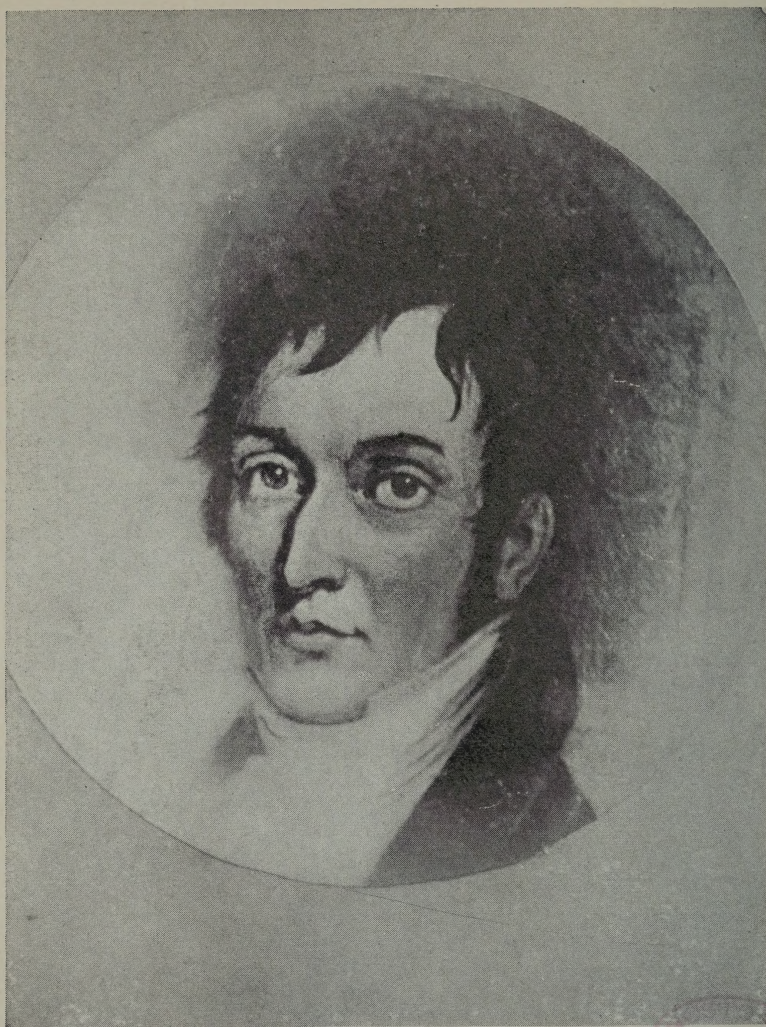
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Oscar Wegelin |









Amos Hawkins



# MICAH HAWKINS AND THE SAW-MILL

A SKETCH OF THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL AMERICAN OPERA  
AND ITS AUTHOR

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⑦ 4047.349

BY

OSCAR WEGELIN

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## MICAH HAWKINS AND THE SAW-MILL

FROM the appearance in print of "The Disappointment" by Col. Thomas Forrest (or, as asserted by some, Andrew Barton), in 1767, until 1824, a number of "Operas" appeared from the pens of native writers. Not until the latter part of that year, however, was a production of this kind given on the American stage that was a success. In that year Mr. Henry Wallack, at that time manager of the Chatham Theatre, New York, produced a piece entitled "The Saw-Mill; or A Yankee Trick. A Comic Opera, in two acts. Written and composed by Micah Hawkins." It was printed in 1824 by Messrs. J. & J. Harper and is a 16mo pamphlet of fifty-three pages. This pamphlet is now quite scarce and I have seen only two copies, one in the collection of Mr. Orville B. Ackerly, the other in the Library of Brown University.

Hawkins, who was really a genius, was born at Stony Brook, L. I., on January 1, 1777. He was the son of Jonas and Ruth Hawkins. In 1791 he was bound apprentice to Frederick King of Morristown, N. J., at the coachmaking business. At the age of twenty-one he came to New York and for a few years

worked at his trade. Soon afterwards he married Letty, daughter of Benj. Lindley of Morristown, who was described as "a lady of much excellence."

Abandoning the business of coachmaking, Hawkins set himself up as a grocer and conducted that business until his death, which occurred July 29, 1825. In addition to his grocery store he also conducted a hotel at the Catherine Street Ferry.

Hawkins' sister, Julia, married Thos. S. Mount and was the mother of the Mount Brothers, artists, the best known of whom was William S. Mount, the *genre* painter.

The portrait of Hawkins which is here given as a frontispiece was painted by an unknown artist and retouched by William S. Mount. It is still hanging in the old Mount House at Stony Brook, and is here reproduced through the courtesy of Mr. Orville B. Ackerly, who loaned me a photographic copy of the original.

The opera, which is today the only claim to fame which Hawkins has, was written as the outcome of a story told by Richard Smith to a party of friends. It related to an incident which occurred at or near the falls of the Genesee. The story, briefly told, is as follows:

Baron Schafferdwal, a wealthy patroon, offers to give 100 acres of land to anyone who will put up a Saw Mill on Oneida Creek, to choose the land him-



self, provided he settle on it. A young man, who in the play is called "Bloom," with a companion, "Herman," hatch up a scheme to put up a mill, disguising themselves as Yankees. The scheme works and not only do they claim the land, but "Bloom" wins the Baron's daughter, while "Herman" also wins the maiden of his choice, "Louisa." This is but a mere outline of the story, but its telling by Smith was not only responsible for the first successful opera written by an American, but another play, supposed to have been written by Garrit Furman, "The Falls of the Genesee" was the outcome of the tale. In the preface to the latter play the author makes the following statement: "The following tale was told to the late Mr. Hawkins, and the author of this piece, by Richard Smith, Esq., of Setauket, Long Island, at a convivial meeting a few years ago. We were pleased with the trick (the deception played by the builders of the mill) and both agreed to endeavour to arrange it in some form, suitable for theatrical representation. Mr. Hawkins, by intermingling songs, glees, &c. lengthened it into an Opera, which was performed with considerable success at Chatham Garden Theatre. This piece was written in 1822, and revised 1826. The Author *Maspeth*, January, 1831." The above was printed and issued in New York, 1831.

The following account of the mill in question is taken from a pamphlet entitled "*Rochester in 1827*":

"The Mill Lot, so called, lying in the centre of the village on the West side of the river and containing 100 acres, was a gift from Oliver Phelps to Ebenezer Allen in 1789, in consideration of his building a grist mill on it, for the accommodation of the new settlers then moving into the country, but the settlements being mostly made along the main road leading through Canandaigua to Buffalo, left this section of the country to remain a wilderness for several years. Mr. Allen moved away, left his mill to go to decay, and sold his lot which passed through several hands to the Pulteny estate. In 1802 Nathaniel Rochester, William Fitzhugh and Charles Carroll, of Maryland purchased the lot, and left it remaining unoccupied until 1812, when they surveyed it into village lots, opened it for sale, and gave it the name of Rochester, the family name of the senior proprietor."

The "Saw-Mill" was first produced at the Chatham Garden Theatre late in November, 1824, with the following cast:

<i>Baron Schafferdwal</i> .....	MR. MORRISON.
<i>Count Phlegm</i> .....	MR. SPILLER.
<i>Bloom</i> .....	MR. BLAKE.
<i>Herman</i> .....	MR. PETRIE.
<i>Stoduff</i> .....	MR. SIMPSON
<i>Jacob</i> .....	MR. ROBERTS.
<i>Elna</i> .....	MRS. ALLEN.
<i>Louisa</i> .....	MRS. WARING.
<i>Norchee</i> .....	MRS. WALSTEIN.

Servants, Canal Lockmen, Workmen on the Saw-Mill, Ladies and Gentlemen, Rustics, &c.

Scene: First at Rome, afterwards at Oneida Creek, State of N. Y.



# THE SAW-MILL:

OR

## A YANKEE TRICK.

*A COMIC OPERA,*

IN TWO ACTS.

IS PERFORMED AT THE THEATRE, CHATHAM GARDEN.  
WITH DISTINGUISHED SUCCESS.

---

WRITTEN AND COMPOSED  
BY MICAH HAWKINS.

---

NEW-YORK:

PRINTED BY J. & J. HARPER,

.....

1824.





The piece was successful from the start and on the 7th of December the author wrote to Benj. F. Thompson, the historian of Long Island, the following interesting letter. This letter is here copied with the permission of Mr. Chas. J. Werner, editor of the third edition of Thompson's History of Long Island, and its present owner. The letter is of considerable importance as regards the author's own opinion of the opera and its production, as well as throwing an interesting sidelight upon his own character. It is herewith given in full.

NEW YORK, Tuesday Morning,  
7th December, 1824.

MY (EVER-ENCOURAGING) FRIEND,

Yours of yesterday came to hand last evening. I thank you for your good wishes toward me. You have ever encouraged me in my feeble attempts at literature—pretensions I had never any legitimate claims to, seeing that *I had never any* education, the very vitals EVER, of an author of the smallest degree. However as there has, since time began, I believe, been many such fools as myself, feel no alarm from being disgraced as the FIRST PRETENDER.

Why yes; my opera of "the Sawmill; or a Yanky Trick," went off tolerably well. It has been played four nights, with increased approbation; notwithstanding that the last night of its representation, Mrs. Waring, one of the principals of its personifications, was so indisposed her part had to be little better than read by Mrs. Fisher, who took up the character at a very short

notice, with entirely leaving out the singing, which is a *very great damage* to the piece. The manager wishes to continue it before the Public, but until Mrs. Waring recovers, (which is quite uncertain, her confinement proceeding from a complaint that lays her by almost every winter,) I shall not permit it, having in my possession both words and Music. Between you and I, no one about the Theatre is able to play the character but Mrs. W.—and I do not wish to be garbled, for, IN MY OPINION, with all that good acting can do for me, I expect very shortly to be honored with severe criticism. Yet “who’s afraid?”

Talk not to me of being ahead of you in anything—for shame, my friend.

If any clever fellow will let you have money, I mean any such within inquiries, you shall hear from me.

Ay, our friend Thos. Hodgkinson’s death. But it is time, poor Tom—Let him rest.

I re-enclose to you “an honest Lawyer” with my thanks for the perusal of what, I presume you mean shall ever be your prototype, which will ever keep you, as you have ever been, most respected by the public, and, particularly by your friend,

MICAH HAWKINS.

BENJ. F. THOMPSON, ESQ.,  
Counsellor at Law,  
Hempstead,  
Long Island.

That the opera was a decided success is proven by the following extract which appeared in a magazine and which is now copied from a clipping found in a scrap book kept by William S. Mount, now owned by Mr. Orville B. Ackerly. There is nothing in the



clipping to show where it appeared or who its author was.

"We see it announced that an opera by Mr. Fry, of Philadelphia is to be brought out at the Chestnut by the Seguins, during their next engagement, and that it is pronounced to be the 'first American Opera' yet produced.

There is evidently a great mistake in this matter, for it will be fresh in the recollection of play-goers, that during the time Mr. Henry Wallack was Manager of the Chatham Theatre, an original American opera (and original it was in every sense of the word) was produced there, and had a long and highly successful career. It was entitled 'The Saw Mill,' and was written and composed by Micah Hawkins, Musician, Poet and Grocer.

Hawkins was a genius, and was considered in those days a capital performer on the violin and piano. Ole Bull, or Wallace, or Jane Sloman, or a host of other eclipsers, were then the things that were 'to be.'

Hawkins kept a grocery shanty in Catherine Street [in 1814 he was at 8 Catherine Slip] and had a piano forte beneath his counter, and played a sort of running accompaniment to the varied demands of his customers, which doubtless attracted a good many to his store, and in the intervals between serving out sugar and salt, tea and tobacco, corned pork and cheese &c., he composed the opera, which Wallack at once accepted, and filled the house for weeks. About the twentieth night Hawkins was unanimously called for, and appeared upon the stage fiddle in hand covered with blushes and a pepper and salt suit. Here he was in a bad dilemma, being unable to speak his thanks, but Wallack came to his aid, and got him

off triumphantly. After this who shall say that Mr. Fry's is the 'First American Opera?' "

The "Saw-Mill" ran for a number of nights and was played at the Park Theatre as late as November 29, 1825.

That Hawkins was a man of talent is vouched for by Thompson in his History of Long Island, in the following terms :

"Much of his leisure was employed in its (music's) cultivation and he became a capital performer on many instruments. Indeed it is known to many now living, that he had attained great accuracy and skill in this enchanting science. The piano, flute, and violin were particularly subject to his will and he could make them discourse most excellent music. He was many years a member of an amateur club, which met weekly for the performance of the best pieces. He was besides, a composer himself, and produced some exquisite compositions. He was moreover the author of several patriotic and comic songs, which he sung with great effect. He possessed an admirable vein of wit with which he was 'wont to set the table in a roar,' while his faculty for imitation has rarely been excelled. He wrote a number of plays, interspersed with original songs, &c. some of which were exhibited upon the stage."

A number of bound volumes of music which were collected by the subject of this sketch are still extant, and from the fly-leaf of one of them was obtained the facsimile of the composer's autograph which is printed underneath his likeness.



A violin once owned by him is owned by Mr. John B. Mount, who also owns some of the music composed by Hawkins.

Hawkins did not long survive the success of his opera, his death occurring at New York on July 29, 1825. Annexed is a copy of his will dated May 17, 1810, almost fifteen years before his demise.

IN THE NAME OF GOD AMEN, I MICAH HAWKINS of the City of New York Grocer being of sound disposing mind and memory, and considering the uncertainty of life, do make this my last will and testament as follows, that is to say. It is my will that all my debts be paid as soon as can be made convenient after my decease, after which I do give devise and bequeath unto my beloved wife Letty Hawkins all and singular the real and personal estate of which I may die possessed or entitled unto of whatsoever nature the same may be as a trifling acknowledgment of her affection and Meritorious conduct. And I also make nominate and appoint my said wife Letty to be sole Executrix of this my last will and testament hereby revoking all former wills. In witness whereof I have hereunto subscribed my name and affixed my seal this seventeenth day of May in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ten.

MICAH HAWKINS (L. S.)

Signed sealed published and declared by Micah Hawkins the within name of testator as and for his last will and testament in the presence of us who have in his presence and in the presence of each other subscribed our names as witnesses.

Elizabeth Shaw, Pamelia A. Lindsay,  
I. Lenington.



By OLIN DOWNES

**W**AS "The Saw-Mill, or a Yankee Trick," early American opera by Micah Hawkins, the première of which, in New York in 1824, was recounted last week in these columns, actually "the first successful American opera"?

The statement may not be incontestable. "Operas" of various sorts were composed and produced in America a good quarter-century before "The Saw-Mill" saw the light. The point is that "The Saw-Mill" was American not only in authorship but in its subject, its period, and locale. Granted conventionalities and absurdities of the plot, it is a genre piece just as are the paintings of Hawkins' nephew, William Sidney Mount, who, when his native contemporaries were painting European palaces and Grand Canals, was devoting himself to pictures of American life as he lived it and saw it about him. Of such authenticity and justifiable fame, are his pictures of "Long Island Farm Houses," now at the American exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London; "Raffling for a Goose" (Metropolitan Museum of Art); "California News, or Reading The Tribune," the scene of which is the postoffice that once was part of the Hawkins-Mount House at Stony Brook, in the days when Horace Greeley was advising young men to "go West" (Melville collection); and his many paintings that involved music, such as "Dancing on the Barn Floor" and "Just in Tune" (Melville collection); "The Power of Music" (Century Association); "The Bones Player," "The Country Dance," etc.

### Based on True Story

And so with Micah Hawkins' opera. For the plot of "The Saw-Mill," with its "Yankee Trick" was made from a true story, "told by Richard Smith of Setauket to a

convivial company which included Micah Hawkins and Garrit Furman of Maspeth, L. I." Thus the Wegelin memoir. Of this story, coming from the grass-roots, Hawkins made his opera and Furman a play, "The Falls of Genesee," performed in 1831. Composer and playwright were much amused and "pleased with the trick and both agreed to endeavor to arrange it in some form, suitable for theatric presentation."

The opera story, as it comes out in Hawkins' arrangement, is of the Dutch Baron Schafferdwal, who offers to give 100 acres of land from his holdings to the man who will put up a sawmill on his property on Oneida Creek, and of the ruse by which a high-born young man, "Mr. Bloom of Rome," and his friend Hermann disguise themselves as rough-hewn Yankee millwrights, put up the mill and, before revealing their true identities, receives each his reward—Bloom getting the land and the Baron's daughter for his bride, Hermann, with his share of the proceeds, which he badly needs, marrying Louisa, from whom poverty, consequent upon the loss of his estates, has kept him apart. There is a foreign nobleman who looks down upon everything American, of course pursuing the Baron's daughter for her fortune, and there are two comic servants who make the third couple of a triple wedding.

### Wide Musical Interests

The mill in question, which inspired the story, was on the west side of the river near Oneida Falls and was given by Oliver Phelps to Ebenezer Allen in 1779, "in consideration of his building a grist mill on it." Of such were the materials of Micah Hawkins' "first successful American opera."

But the musical influence of Hawkins was not confined to his opera, the production of which in a famous New York theatre was to him as a dream come true. He had



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much to do with the bringing up of his four nephews, the Mount boys, three of whom were painters, after they made the Hawkins-Mount house their home. Micah Hawkins instructed them, especially William, in music, to which the painter took as a duck to water. William Sidney, as a boy, often heard the Negro Toney play. He visited his grave with deep emotion when, having become a figure as an artist in New York, he shook the dust of the city from his feet and made his beloved Stony Brook again his home. The Hawkins-Mount House rang with music; the dancing in that grand old mansion and the barn adjoining must have been something to see. The spirit of Micah and old Toney long vibrated in those walls.

The locality, for that matter, was of a singularly artistic sort. In the ways of history it seems to have escaped much of the Puritanic blight which came to a good deal of Long Island from the direction of Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, and resulted in the taboo upon musical instruments in church, the ban upon dancing, the standards of education which made it unseemly for ladies to read Shakespeare.

### **Invented a Fiddle**

William Mount invented and patented the hollow-backed violin, which he called "The Cradle of Harmony." Several of these instruments are in the Suffolk Museum at Stony Brook. These he played upon at the homes of his friends and the country dances. His music books, of which several exist, are filled with dance tunes and famous and popular airs. Some of the entries are his own composition. Others were evidently presented him by friends, who seem to have exchanged good tunes with one another as the country neighbors swapped vegetables and

eggs.

No doubt these were crude manifestations, but very genuine ones, with their roots in the spirit of art and a liberal society.

And William Sidney played upon flutes of his own devising. They proved both practicable and popular; his correspondence shows that he received orders for them from many quarters. They sounded, says his historian, in the society of connoisseurs in New York who gathered about the musician as about the painter at the Goupil Galleries. They could be heard as he played them in the silent night on the wharves down by the water, and in the sunny village streets, where the children would gather at the sound, and follow him like the Pied Piper in the story.



# 'THE SAW-MILL' *works*

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## Comic Opera Written More Than 100 Years Ago on Long Island

By OLIN DOWNES

IT was as recently as 1923 when the late Edward F. Buffet, linguist, engineer, Egyptologist, genealogist and biographer, among other subjects, of William Sidney Mount, found Stony Brook, L. I., a locality happily free of suburbanism and "untainted by progress."

"Indeed," he continues, "the activity of life has lessened rather than increased, for the shipyards were long abandoned, many of the farm fields lie fallow, the piano factory and the rubber works have come only to depart." Perhaps so. But if so, the place is not the loser. Its beauty and tranquillity and unspoiled ways are rather incredible. And here is a whole chapter of American music.

### 'Rustic Leonardo'

This chapter clusters, as one of its centers, about the old Mount House in Stony Brook, famous for artists as the home of William S. Mount, one of the earliest and most distinguished of American genre painters. "A rustic Leonardo," says Mr. Buffet, born, according to legend, "with a paint brush in one hand and a fiddle in the other."

But this house has another title to historic recognition, and not a small one, though one strangely and inexcusably neglected by our musicologists. Before William Mount and his three brothers came there it was the dwelling place of his uncle, Micah Hawkins, coachmaker, grocer, hotel keeper, wit, poet, pianist and composer of what they call in these parts "the first successful American opera."

Indeed the house, restored with admirable care by Ward Melville and recently become the home of Horace Jayne, vice director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, vibrated to music. In colonial days it was hostelry and postoffice too. By one of its great fireplaces is the slave seat where Cain and Anthony, devoted servitor and rare fiddler too, could rest their bones. On the west portal was the Queen Anne knocker which the Mount brothers, artists all, kept freshly painted in flesh tints, applied to the iron countenance as carefully as Anne's maids of honor applied other unguents to the face of their ruler!

### Memorial to a Slave

And in back of the house, on a slope from which English warships could plainly be seen in the harbor in the period of 1812, was a slave burying ground, property of the Mount family. On one of the graves was a headstone, topped by a sculptured violin, its bridge fallen, the strings, by consequence, lying loose and surmounted by a bow, and the following epitaph:

#### ENTIRELY TONELESS

Honor and shame from no condition rise  
Act well thy part, there all the honor lies.

ANTHONY HANNIBAL CLAPP  
of African descent

Born at Horseneck, Connecticut,

14, July, 1749

Came to Setauket in 1779

Here sojourned till he died

12 Oct., 1816



Anthony, though indigent, was most content. Though of a race espisd deserved he much respect—in his deportment modest and polite. Forever faithfully performing in life's drama the eccentric part assigned him by his Maker. His philosophy greed with his example to be happy Himself, selfish but in the oveting from his acquaintance an undivided approbation which e was so Fortunate as to obtain and keep.—Upon the violin, ew play'd as Tony play'd. His artless music was a language universal, and in its Effect—most irresistible! Ay, and was e not of Setauket's dancing steps a Physiognomist, indeed, he was.—Nor old nor young, of either sex, stood on The Floor to fig-it, but he knew the gait, Peculiar of their Hobby, and unasked, Plac'd best foot foremost for them, by his Fiddle.

This Emblematick Lachrymatory, and Cenotaph's the grateful tribute of a few . . . who knew his worth."

This epitaph was written b Micah Hawkins. He was an odish, mad over music. But in thosays one did not make a living b music. Nor was he professionally educated in the art. Micah Hawkins began as a carriage maker's apprentice. This was in New Jersey. Arrived in New York, he became the proprietor of a hotel at the Catharine Street Ferry and the grocery store adjacent. There he ad a piano under his counter, upon which, says the historian, he played for his customers between bargains in pork and cheese, and is head in the clouds, composed his opera.

#### Premiere in 1824

This opera, "The Saw-Mill, or a Yankee Trick, a comic opera in two acts," of which Hawkins was both librettist and composer, had its premiere at Wallack's Chatham Garden Theatre late in November of 1824. Evidently it was a success. After the fourth performance on Dec. 7 Micah wrote Benjamin F. Thompson, the historian of Long Island, a characteristic letter in which, after disclaiming any pretensions to being a literary man, he continues:

"Why yes; my opera of 'The Saw-Mill' or a Yanky Trick, went off tolerably well. It has been played four nights, with increased approbation; notwithstanding that the last night of the representation Mrs. Waring, one of the principals of its personifications, was so indisposed that her part had to be little better than read by Mrs. Fisher, who took up the character at very short notice, with entirely leaving out the singing, which is a very great damage to the piece. The manager wishes to continue it before the public, but until Mrs. Waring recovers . . . I shall not permit it, having in my possession both words and music."

#### Without a Soprano

Apparently the dilemma of an opera with no soprano to sing it was gotten over, since, at its twentieth, thereabouts performance, the author-composer, "unanimously called for," was summoned to the stage, "fiddle in hand"—from which we infer that he reinforced the orchestra, "covered with blushes and a pepper-and-salt suit"—we quote a newspaper clipping of unknown authorship, of some twenty years later, cited in the memoir of Oscar Wegelin. "Here he was in a bad dilemma, being unable to speak his thanks, but Wallack came to his aid, and got him off triumphantly. After this, who shall say that Mr. Fry's is the first American opera?"

The reference here is, of course, to Joseph R. Fry's "Leonora," long accepted as the first grand opera by an American to reach performance. This occurred in Philadelphia in 1845. But "Leonora" was a "grand" opera, sung throughout, as grand opera must be. Hawkins' score belongs in the category of opera of the ballad or buffa type, with spoken text between the musical "numbers." So much is shown in his libretto, a precious document, published in New York in the year of the opera's production, of which perhaps five copies are extant. We have been privileged, through the courtesy of Mr. Richard Gipson of Setauket, to whom we are indebted for much of the information here presented, to examine the copy owned by the Suffolk Museum in Stony Brook. But

where is the music? It remained in manuscript, probably in the form of the one score which the composer guarded so jealously as the source of his power, and it has disappeared. Mr. Buffet, who wrote his biography of William Mount while residing in the famous house, believes it to have been devoured by the squirrels which used to frequent the attic." The responsibility of the squirrels for the disappearance of many an important bit of early Americana is unquestioned. But other manuscripts of Hawkins—poems, songs and various literary effusions—have not vanished. There is hope that a future historian may yet unearth that document, which alone can tell us how the opera sounded.











































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